

President Barack Obama's Foreign Policy: Change We Can Believe In?

Written by John Dumbrell

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JOHN DUMBRELL, JUL 14 2008

The election of America's first African-American president would excite enormous expectation in Europe, and, at least temporarily, reverse much of the hostility to US foreign policy which has been generated over the last six or so years. At the start of 2008, the French newspaper, *Liberation*, wrote of Obama's election as 'atonement' for Bush's invasion of Iraq[1]. According to *The Guardian* newspaper, British people prefer Obama to Republican candidate John McCain by a ratio of 5:1[2].

The Obama- Clinton Democratic primary contest was intrinsically exciting and, indeed, even redemptive. Obama made blunders, notably in relation to the possibility of taking military action in Pakistan without seeking permission from Islamabad, and also some rather overly innocent-sounding commitments to negotiate with dictators from Havanato Tehran. Like Clinton, Obama took some populist stances on free trade, while simultaneously sending signals that they should not be taken too seriously. Apart from his general personal appeal, a key advantage in the primaries was the credibility he derived as an anti-war candidate. While Hillary Clinton voted to support the Iraq invasion in 2002, Obama – not yet elected to the Senate – took the precaution of going on record as an opponent of the action. Promising in 2008 a phased Iraqi combat troop withdrawal to be completed within 12 to 16 months after inauguration, Obama seemed (at least by the standards of Bush and McCain) to be offering to turn swords into ploughshares. 'Instead of fighting the war', declared the Illinois Senator, 'we could be freeing ourselves from the tyranny of oil, and saving the planet for our children'[3].

Obama has an excellent chance of beating McCain in November. He has youth and energy on his side. There are now many more registered Democrats than Republicans in the US, and McCain – however much he may distance himself from Bush – will be damaged by the 'Republican' credit crunch and housing crisis. How radically would a President Obama change the direction of US foreign policy? Cosmetic and presentational changes will certainly occur, but will liberal and European hopes be raised, only to be disappointed? To some degree, the answer to these questions depends on what exactly are the expectations that will accompany an Obama inauguration. No American president is going to disband the US military. Indeed, Obama has promised to add 65,000 to the US Army and 27,000 to the Marine Corps. He has acknowledged that the US must retain the option of using military force unilaterally. No American president, at least in the foreseeable future, is going to remove the security guarantee to Israel. Indeed, more or less at exactly the moment his victory over Clinton was secured, Obama was assuring the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that he would do everything in his power to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran from threatening Israel. Since securing the nomination, Obama has moved rightwards, supporting a bill to strengthen telephone surveillance of terrorist suspects and extending praise to General David Petraeus, leader of the US 'surge' in Iraq. A new Democratic grassroots group, 'Recreate68', has been formed to try to keep Obama from straying too far away from anti-war positions.

The view that little will change with an Obama election is actually quite commonplace, and has left and right-wing versions. To sections of the left, Obama is hopelessly compromised simply by being bound up in the electoral process of the world's standard-bearer for democratic capitalism. The very fact that Obama would command initial international support would actually increase the 'soft power' available to Washington, thus making its imperialism even more effective. For precisely such reasons – 'marxists for Bush' –, Gabriel Kolko urged support for the sitting

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president in the 2004 contest against John Kerry[4]. By the same token, some commentators on the right point out that fundamental American security interests will not alter on the day that Obama is elected. To quote Timothy Lynch and Robert Singh, Obama 'is not dedicated to a peacenik vision of immediate withdrawal (from Iraq). He will not desert Iraq if doing so puts US national security at risk'[5].

When left and right coincide in such a way, it is time for the militant centre to speak out. It is a very extreme version of determinism indeed which fails to allow for personal presidential outlooks and belief structures. Presidents do matter, and they matter particularly in foreign policy. Changes of administration do bring in a new, and often over-confident, outlook: John Kennedy and his 'action intellectuals', Jimmy Carter and the human rights policy, George W. Bush and his neo-conservatism mixed up with offensive realism all constituted significant (if far from absolute) breaks with the past. Obama will bring in a new governing coalition and new personnel. The new governing foreign policy elite will be primarily veterans of the Bill Clinton administration. Their world-view will be shaped by the experience of the Bush years. Some of them, notably former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Susan Rice, bear the imprint of American failure over Rwanda. These people are not in the same mould as Bush and Cheney.

An Obama administration would both please and outrage liberal European opinion. Exit from Iraq will not be swift. Washington is likely to clash with European capitals over the perceived need to increase forces in Afghanistan. An American, or Israeli/American, attack on Iran would be effectively taken off the table of possible policy options. New energy would be applied to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Normalisation of relations with Cuba would be firmly on the agenda. New opportunities would open for democracy-promotion in Africa and for multilateral cooperation on climate change. A loss of faith in the ability of a new president to change policy direction is tantamount to a loss of faith in the democratic process itself.

*John Dumbrell is Professor of Government at Durham University, specialising in American politics and foreign policy. His most recent books are *President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Communism (2004)* and *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq (2006)*. He is currently researching the foreign policies of the administration of Bill Clinton.*

[1] See Charlemagne: 'Those Naïve American Voters', *The Economist*, 12 January 2008.

[2] *The Guardian*, 14 July 2008.

[3] Speech, 'The Costs of War' (available on Council on Foreign Relations website).

[4] John Pilger, 'The Warlords of America', *The New Statesman*, 23 August 2004.

[5] T.J. Lynch and R.S. Singh. 'Don't Expect A Big Change in Foreign Policy', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 June 2008.